

The Old Denham Springs City Hall (1940) is a two story structure built of reinforced concrete. It stands on a corner approximately half a block west of the community's historic main business thoroughfare. Art Deco influence can be seen in the building's exterior and interior detailing. The building has suffered from vandalism and deterioration and still exhibits some alterations made after 1969. However, its historic character, and its National Register eligibility, remain intact.

Somewhat massive and heavy in its proportions, the rectangular building rises from a low water table. The structure is five bays wide and four bays deep. The central three bays of the upper floor are surmounted by a low pediment. In addition, this section projects slightly, giving the impression of a pavilion. Below this projection, a large portico marks the entrance. This portico, and detailing upon the City Hall's parapet, are the austere structure's only exterior decorative elements. The three-bay portico displays two freestanding and two engaged concrete octagonal columns which support an iron grill resembling an architrave. There is also a decorative iron railing on one side. The portico's slightly stepped parapet features two Art Deco style elements. The first is a chevron pattern outlining the cornice. The second is a geometric plaque placed at the parapet's mid-point. This plaque features a stepped top edge and a lozenge pierced by a circle. The building's rooftop parapet features a Greek key band which is broken at the corners of the mock pavilion by lozenge designs.

The interior's only interesting features are decorative cornices and ceiling panels which survive in some areas. The cornices consist of a chevron band, while the ceiling panels incorporate geometric and stylized motifs. The floorplan is quite straightforward. The first floor consists of a central hall flanked by two rooms on each side. The plan of the second floor is similar, except that a large courtroom fills the space on one side of the hall. The original jail cells survive on the second floor inside another room. The building also has a small, two-room basement.

The Old Denham Springs City Hall has undergone several alterations over the years. However, municipal officials are in the process of returning the structure to its original appearance. In addition to the deterioration expected when a building stands vacant, changes not yet removed as of this writing include the following:

- 1) four additional heavy steel jail cells (added after 1969) which completely fill the two first floor rooms on one side of the central hall;
- 2) replaced windows, several of which are totally or partially covered;
- 3) mechanical pipes, conduits and vents located on the exterior rear wall;
- 4) an inappropriate sign on the portico; and
- 5) dropped acoustical ceilings in some rooms.

These changes have not had a serious impact upon the building's external appearance, and its National Register integrity is uncompromised. Clearly, the Old Denham Springs City Hall would easily be recognized by anyone from the historic period, which is the criterion for judging the integrity of a historical nomination. As the symbol of the "coming of age" of the Denham Springs municipal government (see Part 8), the Old Denham Springs City Hall is a strong candidate for National Register listing.

Significant dates 1940
Architect/Builder E. G. Blakewood
Criterion A

The old Denham Springs City Hall is locally significant in the area of politics/government within the Livingston Parish community of Denham Springs because the building represents the "coming of age" of the community's municipal government.

The site which would become known as Denham Springs received its first settlers during the early years of the nineteenth century. First to be associated with the site was farmer Alexander Hogue (1804), whose daughter married William Denham in 1828. Denham soon acquired control of Hogue's 640 acre tract, which he sold to New Orleans businessman Stamaty (perhaps St. Amant) Covas in 1855. A series of springs believed to be rich in minerals existed on the site, and Covas was apparently the owner of an antebellum health resort which flourished at Amite Springs, as the hamlet was known at that time. In 1882 Covas lost the property, which was purchased by George L. Minton for the cost of delinquent taxes. Minton almost immediately began subdividing the old Hogue/Denham tract and selling the lots, as did the owners of the adjacent landholding. It was at this point that the community, now known as Denham Springs, began to grow. Several factors spurred this growth, including the opening of the Denham Springs Collegiate Institute in 1895; the re-development of the springs as a spa and tourist destination around the turn of the century; and the arrival of the Baton Rouge, Hammond and Eastern Railroad (later the Illinois Central) in 1908. As a result of this growth, Denham Springs was incorporated as a village in 1903 and designated a town in 1929. Later in the twentieth century industrial workers from nearby Baton Rouge contributed to the community's development.

Despite its growth and formal recognition of its status by charters from the state, the Denham Springs municipal government functioned without a formal headquarters until the Works Progress Administration erected the building under consideration in 1940. Until that year, the mayor worked out of his home, and the City Council met in a small, one room structure which was also used as a polling place. Like the mayor, the town marshal also worked out of his home. Although the community did have a small jail built of cross-ties, it was not considered strong enough to hold violent prisoners, who were jailed at the parish seat. If public meetings were needed, they were held in the school auditorium.

All this changed with the completion of the City Hall, which was designed to house all of the activities of the municipal government at that time. The new structure included a large meeting space for the city council and local court, offices for the mayor and city workers, a headquarters for law enforcement officials, and a secure jail. Thus, as the local newspaper proclaimed, the completion of the City Hall was "an accomplishment worthy of much praise." The building brought local government services together under one roof for the first time, marking the "coming of age" of Denham Springs' municipal government.

Note:

Denham Springs was elevated to the status of a city in 1959. Ten years later the local government relocated to a new and larger City Hall and the Police Department (as the city's law enforcement agency was by then called) took over the older building. The old City Hall has stood vacant since the police obtained a new headquarters building in 1984. However, the city is actively seeking options for restoring and using the building.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Community Environmental Design Studio, Louisiana State University, "Renovation Feasibility Study and Redesign Proposal," Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1986.

Denham Springs News, March 21, 1940; April 18, 1940; November 21, 1940.

History Book Committee, History of Livingston Parish, Louisiana, n.p.: Edward Livingston Historical Association, 1986.

Interview with Joe Jackson, December 18, 1992. Mr. Jackson is a long-time Denham Springs resident and was a member of the City Council during the 1930s.

Livingston Parish American Revolution Bicentennial Committee, The Free State: A History and Place-Names Study of Livingston Parish, n.p., 1976.